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ABSTRACT

This study utilized teaching cases as an assessment tool in measuring student teachers' dispositions, collecting data from online courses. It examined student behaviors during online analyses of a case study that revealed culturally sensitive dispositions, noting whether there were factors in those analyses that could be identified and used to infer disposition. Graduate students from five online courses were asked to read a teaching case, "White Faces Don't Want to be My Friend" (Rand & Shelton-Colangelo, 2003) and then participate in a discussion held in a synchronous online chat room. The teaching case is about an elementary student health teacher who has difficulty managing her classes, primarily because of one challenging student, and who is confronted with a racial issue. Analysis of data from the chats identified four bi-polar categories: recognizes race as an issue in the case/believes race is not an issue; solutions target individual child/solutions target larger classroom context; sees curriculum as solution to problem/sees solution as beyond curriculum; and teacher as advocate/teacher as helpless. Though many students did not identify issues as being racially-oriented, many of their solutions did indeed target race. (Contains 38 references.) (SM)

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Identifying and Describing Perceptual Factors used for Inferring Teacher Candidate Dispositions from Online Case-based Discussions

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Almost 2 decades ago, Katz and Raths (1985) proposed that professional dispositions be added as a goal for teacher education programs in addition to professional knowledge and skills. Recently, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2000) and the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards adopted new performance-based standards for teacher education programs that include a major focus on developing dispositions.

Goodlad (1994) argues that all teaching involves values and suggests moral dimensions of teaching should be the mission of teacher education. Many maintain that teacher education needs to radically transform its policies and practices to enable teachers and teacher candidates to effectively teach students of all backgrounds (Nieto, 2000; Sockett, 1993; Zeichner & Liston,1987). One challenge, though, is that "multicultural education" is often narrowly defined as curriculum reform that includes only content about ethnic or racial groups rather than focusing on attitudes, perceptions, and dispositions of teachers (Banks, 1994).

Goodlad (1990) suggests that dispositions are hard to affect and that teacher candidates' beliefs often revert back to more traditional notions. Some success, however, has been found in changing dispositions through coursework, clinical experiences, modeling by professors and mentors, and discussion forums (Wakefield, 1993;Yost, 1997). Much research has linked effective teaching to sets of dispositions (Reiman & Thies-Sprinthall, 1998; Good & Brophy, 1994; Collinson, 1996; Wubbels, Levy & Brekelman, 1997; Dee & Henkin, 2002).

A growing body of literature suggests analysis of open-ended stories about problems that teachers face, such as teaching cases, is a promising way of changing dispositions (Campbell, 1997; Luckowski, 1997; Strike, 1993; Strike & Soltis, 1985, Wasserman, 1994; Shulman, 1992). This can be a valuable method for program level evaluation, as well as student evaluation (Berliner, 1994; Stephens, 1996; Moje & Wade, 1996; Moster, 1996; Rand, 1998, Weiner, Rand, Pagano, Obi, Hall, Eberly & Bloom, 2000).

In this study we utilized teaching cases as an assessment tool in measuring dispositions. At the heart of case analysis are the discussions that lead to the exchange of ideas and reframing of one's outlook. We think that this will be a valuable method for giving students feedback, provoking important discussions, and evaluating the effectiveness of our teacher education programs in promoting anti-bias dispositions (Berliner, 1994; Moje & Wade, 1996; Mostert, 1996; Rand, 1998, Weiner, et al., 2000).

We have chosen to utilize online courses to gather this data as we feel it creates a unique context for social interaction and collaboration. In our experience (Eberly, Rand, & Caulfield, 2002), students are more willing to take risks in online discussions and chats. Students more freely express opinions that differ from those of their classmates and instructors. They perhaps feel a sense of security behind their computer screens that they do not feel in face-to-face class discussions.

One of the criticisms of online course delivery, however, has been the lack of personal and social contact between instructor and students. At the same time there has been an increase in the importance placed on building and assessing dispositions in

teacher education. This research links these two concerns by giving a clearer picture of the possibilities in identifying dispositions from online behavior.

Recently, researchers have begun to examine the differences between online discussion and traditional in-class discussion. Barab, Merrill and Thomas (2001) argue that online learning can foster a sense of community among the participants, as well as foster a reflective environment. Comparing online course delivery systems and the traditional face-to-face format is an area that has recently received attention. Schneider, Frechtling, Vivian and Kerwin (2002) report a more equal amount of participation in online discussions as opposed to face-to-face discussions. Davidson-Shivers et al. (2000) found that online chats and list serve discussions provided an interactive environment in which students gave reflective, thoughtful responses to posed questions and made supportive comments to one another. Wizer & Beck (1996) found that online discussions related to diversity issues facilitated the involvement of less-verbal students in voicing their opinion, eased the tension of controversial issues, and changed student/teacher roles. Johnson, et al. (1999) found that online courses can result in the same learning outcomes as traditional classes; however, Klemm (2000) identifies the many pitfalls of online discussions and shows that planning and structure are important to positive outcomes.

The purpose of this research is to identify and describe the perceptual factors used as criteria for inferring teacher candidate dispositions from online case-based analysis. Our research questions were: What student behavior during online analysis reveals culturally sensitive dispositions? Are there factors in these analyses that we can identify and use to infer dispositions?

Method

Procedures

Graduate students enrolled in five online courses were asked to read a teaching case, "White Faces Don't Want to be My Friend" (Rand & Shelton-Colangelo, 2003) and then participate in a discussion held in a synchronous online chat room. The teaching case is about a student teacher in elementary health education who has difficulty managing one of her first-grade classes, primarily because of one challenging student. Toward the end of the case, the student teacher describes the following scene:

> As part of a dental unit, I was reading the class a book about a missing tooth. The book told about two best friends who were always alike until one of them lost a tooth and the other experienced profound disappointment over being different. As I led the class in a discussion about how people did not have to be the same to be friends, I was struck by the fact that Jasmine was leaning forward and listening intently. I saw her slowly raise her hand and hesitantly begin to speak. She said, "I get upset because I have a black face, and white faces don't want to be my friend." (p. 81).

Students were enrolled in a semester-long course in which participation was entirely online. Students had interacted online for 8 weeks before the data were collected, but they had never met each other in person. Chats lasted for a total of one hour. In each chat, students were asked to 1) identify the major issues in the case; 2) discuss short-term solutions to the case; and 3) discuss long-term solutions to the case.

Transcripts (generated from WebCT, the delivery software for the course) from the five chat sessions were analyzed by parsing each discussion into conversational units

and compiling all units for each student. These units were analyzed for similarities across discussions and across subjects. These similarities were used to generate categories of perceptual factors (definitions of behaviors used to infer dispositions) using a method described by Wasicsko (2002).

A qualitative description of these perceptual factors was done to identify bipolar criteria for each factor as it related to cultural responsiveness in teaching (Carter & Goodwin, 1994; Banks, 1993; Nieto, 2000)

Results

Four bi-polar categories were identified through the deconstruction of the conversations. The categories are bi-polar in the sense that we believe one end to be culturally responsive, while the other end lacks sensitivity to cultural factors.

Recognizes Race as an Issue in the Case/ Believes Race is not an Issue

Through analyses of the conversations, student responses very clear fell into one of these two categories. Surprisingly, students predominantly argued that race was not an issue. "It may not really be her black face, but rather her behavior/actions that are alienating others. Has anyone considered learning disabilities? Maybe she was frustrated with school work and this is a form of rebellion? Many times children with learning problems have social and emotional problems, too." Another student outwardly denied race played a role in the case: "I feel that this case is really not about race but about teachers who are afraid to deal with the heavy issues that cause children to act out. Children in this case I feel are dealing with major self esteem issues. They want so badly to be accepted by others. When they are not it's kinda like a bad constant chest pain that

won't go away, in other words the end of the world. I think this is the way Jasmine was feeling."

Students who felt race was an issue made statements such as, "I also find in kindergarten that the children are concerned with each other's color," or "I think people in general are afraid to approach any subject that may be racial."

Solutions Target Individual Child/ Solutions Target Larger Classroom Context

Many students argued that the ownership of the problem was the child's alone. Because of this, many solutions related specifically to the child. For example, students suggested that the child should meet with the guidance counselor, a behavior modification plan be implemented, or that the child be tested for ADHD.

Other students, however, said that it was important to examine the overall curriculum and environment for its cultural sensitiveness. "When this subject came up in my class we were sitting at a rainbow table. I asked all the students to put their hands into the center including mine and we talked about how our hands were the same rather than different." Not all comments addressed multicultural curriculum. For example, one student suggested "pairing up students to do projects together may help her make friends."

Sees Curriculum as Solution to Problem/ Sees Solution as Beyond Curriculum

As mentioned above, many students stated that curriculum was the solution to the problem. They argued that racial issues could be solved by adding multicultural paints and crayons to the classroom or by having a multicultural feast. They made comments such as, "The teacher could also introduce music into the discussion. There are many songs that the children could listen to, one example 'We are the World'." Others

suggested including information from students' backgrounds: "Have each student find out about their background for a project and discuss it in class, so she can see that everyone is from different places," and "Having each family prepare a dish from their homeland for the class to feast on is always fun too!" One student suggested, "There should be a guest speaker once a month to go over the different ethic backgrounds that make up the classroom." These were typical of the comments made by the students. While curriculum is certainly an issue that needs addressed, these activities alone will not foster the kind of change that is necessary in order for children such as Jasmine not to feel that "white faces don't want to be my friend."

Few argued that change needed to be on a broader scale that extended beyond the classroom to the school. Students, for example, suggested that perhaps staff training might help teachers learn how to deal with racial issues in their classrooms. No one argued that change needed to take place beyond the school to the larger community outside.

Teacher as Advocate/Teacher as Helpless

Some students immediately suggested fostering change through classroom activities or discussions. They, in essence, saw themselves as possible change-agents or advocates. Other students made comments that suggested their feelings of helplessness. These students often blamed the home life or argued that "children will be children." Some cited their lack of experience as a factor: "I have a primarily white population--so I do not have much experience with this." Another expressed an overall sense of helplessness: "It would be very tough and hard to come up with a response that second." And yet another feared crossing perceived boundaries: "You also have to be careful

about going over certain boundaries with other people's children. Home environment plays a big issue… if the home environment is not multicultural they won't learn it!"

Discussion

The ability to recognize and identify culturally-sensitive dispositions is an important skill for both teacher educators and teachers to possess. This research begins the work of identifying them through the use of teaching cases during online discussions embedded as part of graduate-level coursework. These results show the possibility of identifying perceptual factors to be used as criteria for revealing the underlying disposition that is producing the observed behavior.

Through the analyses of these conversations, we learned that our students often do not identify issues as being racially-oriented, yet curiously many of their solutions did indeed target race. Students outwardly argued that Jasmine's problem was not related to race, even though Jasmine clearly stated that "White faces don't want to be my friend." Many of their solutions, however, targeted curriculum, in particular, multicultural curriculum. Their solutions, however, generally do not go beyond simple add-on curricular activities that will, unfortunately, not foster and create the deeper change necessary. In general, students do not seem to view themselves as active change-agents.

Deconstructing the conversations surrounding case analysis in online discussions has strong potential for self-assessment because of the ability to retrieve transcripts of discussion/analysis. Students and instructors can re-visit their responses as a way to reflect on their dispositions. Identifying and describing the perceptual factors used to better categorize students' responses becomes an assessment tool as well as a means for personal growth and change in dispositions over time.

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